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ABSTRACT

A strategy is presented for explaining (and discerning) subtle differences in two words that appear to be semantic twins in one context but are not interchangeable in another context. This strategy suggests the following: (1) list several phrases that contain one of the problem words, then swap the second word for the first; (2) examine the substitutions and determine which do not greatly change the phrases's meaning, which are distinctly impermissible, and which change in phrase's meaning; (3) form and test a hypothesis that explains observed differences. For example, exchange "tall" for "high" in the phrases "the highest mountain," "a bird flying high," and "let's get high." The meaning of the first phrase does change appreciably, but the second phrase becomes gibberish. The last phrase has a new (though absurd) meaning. Comparing the substitutions with the original phrases shows that both refer to a measure of height from a plane of reference, but that the use of "tall" doesn't permit upward separation from that plane of reference while "high" does. This strategy entails a skeptical view of the tendency to see idioms everywhere, and questions the belief that it is the norm for words to radically change meaning in different contexts. (JL)

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"What's the difference between tall and high?"

A strategy for answering hard questions about partial synonyms

Seth Lindstromberg

Introduction

In my capacity of teacher trainer, I have observed that novice teachers have particular difficulty in dealing adequately with students' questions about the meanings of words. Questions of the what's-the-difference-between-x-and-y type appear to be especially troublesome, perhaps because these questions are almost always loaded. That is, the students who ask them usually know part of the answer. They know that the two words at issue are occasionally used very differently while at other times, in other contexts, they appear to be semantic twins. Neither is it unusual for a student to have a particularly thorny example for you to consider. After all, these questions do not come from nowhere.

Actually, though, I am struck by how brave students are in posing these questions at all. Can they not have noticed how seldom they get a decent answer? Most language teachers, having a guilty awareness of this, are inclined to suspect ill will and think, "She knows I can't answer that!". Consequently, as I have seen in scores of language classes, teachers may simply ignore these questions, or else give quick and defensive replies that bear no serious scrutiny. Some teachers have told me quite plainly that they resent such questions -- and they show it, in class.

Naturally, there are braver and kinder souls, too. More often than not, though, they explain everything, five times, none too well, and leave everyone, themselves included, perplexed and unsettled.

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Of course, with the emotional distance that time and a cup of tea may provide, it becomes easier to see that these hard questions generally reflect an uncomplicated desire for a satisfactory answer, along with belief that you might be the person to supply it. Why not take the one as a sign of wholesome interest and the other as a compliment? Now all now you have do is come up with the answer.

Unfortunately, teacher training courses are well known to spend little time on this class of problem. Moreover, the nearest dictionaries and grammar handbooks may well be of no help.

My aim in what follows is to present a strategy you can use to find your own answers, good ones too. It's a strategy you can employ in class or out. In the former case, you will need to use the magic words, "That's a very interesting question, I'll need time to think about it". Otherwise, break off what you were doing (or come back to the question when you have time) and enlist the class as colleagues in the exploration to come. Incidentally, if you have a fear of improvisation, this can be excellent self-training. You are lucky enough to have a thread to follow, you just can't see the end of it.

The example case -- tall and high -- is from English, but that's only because English is the language I teach.

Procedure

1. Think of a few sentences or phrases containing one of the problem words -- or elicit some from your group. Aim for a good variety of uses, but don't collect too many examples and don't worry about putting them in any sort of order.

I'll start with high, like this:

a. **The highest mountain in the world...**

b. **How high can a swallow fly?**

c. We want the top of the table to be about so high...where my finger is.

d. Wanna get high?

2. Now, keep the same examples, but swap in the second of the two problem words, thus:

a' The tallest mountain...

b' How tall can a swallow fly?

c' We want the top of the table to be about so tall...

d' Wanna get tall?

3. Put your new examples into three groups — (A) ones that are distinctly impermissible; (B) ones that have a clear but quite different meaning from the original example, even though this meaning might be rather odd; and (C) ones where the meaning has not changed much from the original even though they might sound unnatural. To each group add the corresponding phrase or sentence from your original set of examples, this gives you groups of pairs. These are mine: (A) b/b'; (B) d/d'; (C) a/a', c/c'. Don't worry too much about the borderline cases; here (c') is in group C, but it could be in group B.

If you have no group B, try to think of at least one new pair of sentences that you can put in this group since it's the one most likely to provide clues. These come when you ask yourself how the use of one word rather than another changes the meaning of each mini-context.

If nothing occurs to you after looking at the pairs of sentences or phrases in group B, look next at the ones in Group A. (I generally put off consideration of group C until I already have a fairly clear idea about how the two problem words differ in meaning.)

At this stage, you may also poll your fellow teachers. My experience, though, is that students' contributions are at least as useful.

4. Form a working hypothesis from your conclusions about the meaning changes you have noticed.

The idea I got from looking at (d) and (d') is that getting high, in the literal sense, means getting up in the air, with feet off the ground — maybe in a plane, on a ladder, or in a tree. (Of course, getting high in the metaphorical sense usually involves taking some sort of drug or intoxicant and losing contact with reality instead of terra firma.)

Getting tall, however, means (literally) changing shape, that is, becoming vertically elongated.

My hypothesis, then, is that high does not suggest change of shape, and tall doesn't suggest upward separation from a plane of reference, be it the ground, floor, seabed or whatever.

5. Once you've got a hypothesis, try it out on groups A and C in that order. You might, like me, save the hardest example for last:

Re: (b) — A high flying swallow is, obviously, separated from the ground.

Re: (b') — Swallows do not vertically elongate when they fly, and nothing else in context (b') is compatible with the notion of vertical elongation either.

In short, the hypothesis accounts both for the acceptability of (b) and the unacceptability of (b').

Re: (c) — The top of a table, by virtue of its legs, is separated from the plane of reference (i.e., the floor or ground), so the hypothesis holds.

Re: (c') — The tops of tables are broad and flat rather than tall. This probably explains why most people would say high, as in (c), rather than tall. Considered as a whole, however, a table is something that can be tall. This probably accounts for the fact that example (c') is not wildly unacceptable. (Indeed, one occupational hazard of EFL is that after a few years of being barraged with wonky English, examples like (c') may not sound so odd at all!)

Re: (a/a') — This is the hard one since mountains are certainly not physically separated from the plane of reference, which is, presumably, the surface of the earth. So, how can it be that we tend to speak of high rather than tall mountains? Let's look at some possible reasons:

First, mountaintops are, by definition, far above ground level. They may even be above the clouds. In fact, when you see mountains from a distance, it may only be their tops that you see, their bases being, perhaps, obscured by mist, cloud, foothills or the curvature of the earth.

Second, one semantic feature of the word tall that hasn't been mentioned yet is its indication of extension along one dimension only, not two or three (unlike, for example, big). Consequently, tall is not an ideal word to apply to anything as broad as a mountain; that is, even if we can see the base of a mountain, we may use high simply because it does not clash with our notion of 'mountain' as much as tall does. Anyway, I will bet that if you do ever call a mountain tall, it will be a vertically stretched mountain or peak like the Matterhorn. And this fits our hypothesis like a glove.

6. Try to think of uses of either word that might either scuttle your hypothesis (then you have to look for another one) or force you to refine it.

Conclusion

The core meaning of each of two partial synonyms can often be found by examining contexts where both words are acceptable but where they convey quite different meanings. When collecting such contexts, it is a good idea to postpone consideration of any metaphorical uses until you already have a hypothesis. (I broke this rule by including (d) in my first set of examples.) This is particularly important when working with prepositions (e.g., to and toward/s) since your metaphorical examples are quite likely to outnumber your literal ones, and trying to form a hypothesis about core meanings by considering a mix of literal and metaphorical examples will cause no end of confusion.

Even so-called 'grammatical' (or 'function' or 'non-lexical' or 'delexicalized') words like as and like can be differentiated by using the approach described here. After all, why should a word exist if it doesn't have a meaning? And if it has a meaning, why shouldn't you be able to find it?

The strategy presented here entails a skeptical view not only of the common tendency to see idioms everywhere but also of the currently fashionable belief that it is the norm for words to radically change in meaning as they change in their context (or part of speech). What I believe happens is that different contexts allow different amounts of a word's meaning to be conveyed. That is, words slim down to fit the amount of their meaning that is compatible with a given context, with the fat coming from the periphery, not the core of a word's meaning (see Bolinger, 1974). Thus, a highchair (or rather its seat and the child on it) is only relatively high; but it is still high in the fundamental sense of separation from the floor. And a tall tale (or order) is a tale (or order) that has (metaphorically) been stretched.

The advantage of looking at word meaning in this way is that it makes it possible, after some trial and error, to give concise answers to many questions about word meaning and so greatly reduce the memory load involved in word learning. Think of what it must be like to be told, of one word after another, that there are several quite different meanings depending on context. Fortunately, there is reason to believe that few words have anything like the chameleon about them.

Now, having thus thrown down the gauntlet before the current wisdom, I'll retire to see if I can think of a meaning for than.

References

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